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AUTHOR Burke, Charles E.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the ideological rift reflected in two communist-oriented and one Western-oriented Nicaraguan newspapers. It was hypothesized that items in "La Prensa" would refer to the United States more favorably and more frequently than they would refer to the Soviet bloc, while items in "Barricada" and "Diario" would refer to Soviet allies more frequently and more favorably than they would to United States affairs. Three composite weeks for each newspaper were studied. Coders decided whether each of 615 items reflected favorably, neutrally, or unfavorably on the government of the nation cited, and assigned a news topic category to each item. The numbers of unfavorable and favorable items referring to the United States in "La Prensa" were virtually identical, and most items were neutral, leaving little basis for government accusations of blatantly pro-United States sympathies. The precentage of Soviet bloc items rated unfavorable, however, was over half, implying a lack of balance in dealing with communist nations. Results involving "Barricada" and "Diario" devoted considerably more attention to the United States, mostly unfavorable, while those items referring to the Soviet Union and its allies were largely favorable. (HTH)

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IDEOLOGICAL BIAS IN NICARAGUAN NEWSPAPERS

Charles E. Burke
Associate Professor
University of Florida
College of Journalism and Communications
Gainesville, FL 32611
(904) 392-0435

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ABSTRACT

IDEOLOGICAL BIAS IN NICARAGUAN NEWSPAPERS

Charles E. Burke

The ideological rift in Nicaragua is reflected in its newspapers. Two of the major daily newspapers come down on the side of the Soviet Union and its allies. The third daily does otherwise, while relying more heavily on "Western" news agencies for its international coverage.

Since the time period dealt with in this study, the Nicaraguan government has imposed "state of emergency" censorship. This study helps us consider the extent to which such censorship is "justifiable," if at all.

A nation's mass media system is said to be closely related in function to its socio-political system.[1] Such a correspondence would seem to imply a certain consensus in the given system. However, nations in flux likely lack such stability. Nicaragua, several years after its revolution, is such a nation.

Nicaragua's major daily newspapers reflect a variety of socio-political predilections, with the very nature of the "system" in the balance. The issues are now those of "Marxism vs. representative democracy, capitalism vs. the rule of the proletariat, social responsibility vs. individual right, nationalism vs. imperialism, and more."[2] This study explores ways in which Nicaraguan newspapers diverge ideologically and, specifically, how they might betray a pro-Soviet or pro-United States bias.

In March of 1982, the Sandinista government of Nicaragua resorted to coercion by fiat. Under terms of a "state of emergency," newspapers would submit all editions to government censors prior to publication. Mass media were further enjoined to present the government's side of any story, should a contrary version have currency. It would appear that Nicaragua

is one of increasing numbers of countries which are "discovering Marxist principles justifying press controls and are adapting them to local circumstances."[3] Moreover, "with a Marxist leadership and an affinity for the Eastern Bloc, it is obvious that the Sandinistas are not particularly comfortable with Western-style 'freedom of the press.'"[4] It should be pointed out that the newspaper editions dealt with in this study predate by several months the imposition of "state of emergency" censorship.

The government crackdown was directed in part at a maverick La Prensa, with which the Sandinistas had conducted a running and mutually antagonistic battle. Prior to the "emergency" declaration, La Prensa had been shut down five times by the government and twice more by hostile mobs at the gates.[5] The fact that La Prensa circulation outran the combined circulation figures[6] of the competition did little to lessen the government's displeasure.

Barricada is the official organ of the ruling Sandinistas. It is said to be only "slightly less inflammatory"[7] than the other major daily, El Nuevo Diario (hereinafter referred to as Diario). Diario claims to be independent but generally sides with the government. La Prensa often refers to the similarity of Diario and Barricada and uses the terms "Barrodiario" and "Nuevicada" to make its point.[8] The implication is that both newspapers not only represent the same viewpoint but are editorial echoes of one another. This study examines that possibility.

Barricada and Diario are, in effect, creatures of the

revolution. What is perhaps disconcerting is that they, like La Prensa, are directed by members of the same Chamorro family. The publishing family of La Prensa had held together through three generations and a fearlessly anti-Somoza stance. The split occurred after the revolution when brothers and uncle decided to pursue different editorial and ideological paths.

This study tests the assumption that one can determine the intentions of authors through examination of content. The assumption is based on the notion that "an intention to move an audience to belief or action, usually on a public issue . . . is (frequently) a construct implicit in the text. "[9] It is also assumed that the saliency of headlines and certain other newspaper components extends across cultures. Thus, Nicaraguan newspaper readers are assumed to attend relatively closely to such elements, as do their North America counterparts who "read twice as many headlines as they do units of text . . . (and are) partial to the component elements from which stories or items are constructed."[10] For purposes of the present study, headlines of news stories, editorials, signed and unsigned commentaries along with photos with captions and cartoons have been chosen for analysis. It is noteworthy that Sandinista leader Tomas Borge concentrated on certain La Prensa headlines and photo captions in his attack on that newspaper's alleged "defense of imperialism and opposition to the revolution."[11]

Hypotheses

1. Items in La Prensa referring to the United States (hereinafter referred to as US) are more likely to be "favorable" than are items referring to the Soviet Union and its Allies (hereinafter referred to as USSR/ALLIES).*

2. Items in Barricada and Diario referring to the US are more likely to be "unfavorable" than are items referring to the USSR/ALLIES.

3. La Prensa is likely to present relatively more items concerning the US and fewer concerning the USSR/ALLIES than are Barricada and Diario.

4. Barricada and Diario are likely to present relatively more items dealing with Foreign Policy and Military Affairs than is La Prensa.

5. La Prensa is likely to present relatively more items from Western news agencies than are Barricada and Diario.

Method

A random sample was taken of three months issues (October 1, 1981 - December 31, 1981) of the respective newspapers. This yielded three composite weeks, one from each of the three months. Each newspaper was represented on each of the twenty-one days. This approach was designed to preclude the possiblility

*For purposes of this study, "Allies" of the Soviet Union are identified as Cuba, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Yugoslavia, East Germany, Romania and the "Soviet Bloc" as a whole.

that a given edition or news story might predominate and perhaps skew results.

A reliability test of six (two each of each newspaper) randomly selected issues was conducted by the author and a Latin American journalism student. Intercoder agreement on the "favorable," "neutral," or "unfavorable" nature of all 70 items within those newspapers was 82.8%. Two other Latin American journalism students assigned the same items to news categories and, in so doing, showed agreement of 78.4%. The level of agreement was considered adequate given the number (8) of categories.

Three Latin American journalism students coded and judged the contents of the entire sample.* Of the 615 items in the sample, headlines constituted 80%, photos with captions 18%, and cartoons 2%. Another six items contained references to both the US and USSR/ALLIES. Given their small number, such items were eliminated from consideration.

Coders made two subjective judgments relative to each item. They decided whether an item reflected favorably, neutrally** or unfavorably on the government of the nation cited. The emphasis on governments was designed to preclude the possibility of confusion with the "people" of a given nation

*All coders assured that they had no prior familiarity with Nicaraguan newspapers. Moreover, the order of items was randomized for each coder to preclude possible sequential bias.

**Neutral in this context signifies non-directional, i.e., neither "unfavorable" nor "favorable." The numbers of neutral items did not enter into calculations although they are presented in the pertinent table. Numbers in all tables represent percentages. They have been rounded and do not always total 100.

and to better focus on the ideological dimensions of items. Moreover, "the image (abroad) of the United States is determined by governmental action"[12] as is, presumably, the "image" of the Soviet Union and its allies.

The other subjective element involved assignment of a given item to one of eight categories of news topics: Foreign Policy, Military Affairs, Economics, Domestic Politics, Crime, Health, Accidents and Disasters, and Other. Category selection recognized that, in foreign newspapers

> relatively little attention (is given) US culture, development in medicine, science and education. Matters of serious concern to Americans--the domestic economy, crime, energy and religion--are not given much attention.[13]

Results

Results supported the first hypothesis (by Fisher's Exact Test, 1-Tailed, p .0001; phi = -.49) Items in La Prensa referring to the US and judged "unfavorable" or "favorable" were divided almost equally (Table 1). Items in La Prensa referring to the USSR/ALLIES were much more frequently "unfavorable" than "favorable."

Results also supported the second hypothesis (by Fisher's Exact Test, 1-Tailed, p .0001; phi = .88). Barricada and Diario items referring to the US (Table 1) were more often considered "unfavorable" than "favorable" (201 vs. 3). Conversely, items in Barricada and Diario referring to the USSR/ALLIES were considered

more often "favorable" than "unfavorable" (41 vs. 6).

Hypothesis three lacked support (Table 1). Indeed, the reverse was the case (by Fisher's Exact Test, 1-Tailed, p .0001; phi = -.25). La Prensa presented relatively more items about the USSR/ALLIES than did its counterparts (110 or 49% vs. 95 or 24%). On the other hand, Barricada and Diario presented a total of 296 items (76%) concerning the US.

The fourth hypothesis lacked sufficient support (by Fisher's Exact Test, 1-Tailed, p. .0008; phi = -.134). As shown in Table 2, Barricada and Diario indeed presented a relatively higher percentage of items concerning Foreign Policy and Military Affairs than did La Prensa (80% vs. 66%). Of itself, Foreign Policy also received relatively more attention from Barricada and Diario. The two devoted 57% of their items to Foreign Policy whereas La Prensa devoted 45%.

Consistent with the fifth and final hypothesis (table 3), La Prensa presented relatively more news items from "Western" news agencies than did Barricada or Diario (by Fisher's Exact Test, 1-Tailed, p .0005; phi = .623). In fact, all 150 La Prensa news items originating outside Niacaragua carried full attribution,i.e., location and wire service identification. Moreover, all agencies were identifiable as major, "Western" sources of news. La Prensa simply did not utilize agencies of the "Third World" or of Communist nations.

Barricada and Diario showed more of a mix in this respect, although both often failed to fully attribute their sources. Of 126 news stories originating outside the country, Barricada fully

attributed only 43 (34%). Of those items, 37 carried the name of the wire service and location, five were contributed by Barricada's own correspondent and one was a reprint of a Washington Post story. The Cuban-based Prensa Latina (PL) was the source of 16 (43%) of the 37 fully attributed items, AP and ANN (Agency of New Nicaragua) followed with 7 (19%) each. Other "Western" agencies were represented, but only minimally so.

Diario fully attributed 77 (57%) of 135 news items from abroad, including one from its own correspondent. PL and AFP each accounted for 26% of fully attributed items, AP 16% and EFE 12%.

Discussion

La Prensa appeared relatively even-handed in its headlines, cartoons and photo captions referring to the US. There seemed to be little basis here for government accusations of blatantly pro-US sympathies: the numbers of "unfavorable" and "favorable" items were virtually identical. Moreover, the large majority of US items (72%) was considered "neutral."

La Prensa seemed to reverse its course when dealing with the USSR/ALLIES. The percentage of "unfavorable" items (65%) implied a decided lack of equanimity when dealing with com munist nations. Likewise, only La Prensa paid considerable attention to the domestic politics of the USSR/ALLIES (mainly Poland) and none of those 27 items was deemed "favorable."

Results involving Barricada and Diario seemed clear-cut.

Items referring to the USSR/ALLIES were largely "favorable" and those referring to the US largely "unfavorable." Barricada and Diario devoted considerably more attention to the US, whereas La Prensa devoted approximately the same number of items to each camp.

The high percentages of Foreign Policy items in all three newspapers is perhaps understandable. Nicaragua has to look outward for new aid and alliances. Moreover, the time frame of this study coincided with two international conferences dealing, in part at least, with policy toward nations of the "Caribbean basin." Nonetheless, the often polemical framing of such items, coupled with the relative lack of other news topics, smacks more of propaganda than preoccupation.

The sole reliance of La Prensa on "Western" news agencies would seem to constitute a pro-Western bias. It also justifies to some extent the charge by the Nicaraguan government that La Prensa presents only one side of certain stories.[14] On the other hand, the wire service policy of La Prensa may represent an advantage if, indeed, Western news agencies are considered more "credible."[15] This could account, in part, for the relative popularity of La Prensa. Certainly, the failure of Barricada and Diario to fully attribute many of their wire service stories does not enhance their credibility.

Summary

All three Nicaraguan dailies appear somewhat tendentious in their treatment of the nations cited. The exception would

seem to be La Prensa vis-a-vis the US, although La Prensa, "as an example of 'good journalism' in the accepted Western sense leaves a lot to be desired."[16] Overall, the relatively high percentages of "favorable" and "unfavorable" ratings and generally modest percentages of "neutral" betray a judgmental quality in the headlines, photos with captions and cartoons (the last perhaps necessarily so). To this degree, the ideological cleavage in Nicaragua is reflected in the newspapers.

The similarity in approach of Barricada and Diario raises questions of redundancy. There would seem to be a place in Nicaragua for a truly independent daily representing a more objective and less ideologically oriented position. As for La Prensa, its ability to function as before seems unlikely, so long as the "government's assault on dissent and democratic opposition continues"[17] and "state of emergency" censorship applies.

TABLE 1

NATIONS BY NEWSPAPERS

	BARRICADA		DIARIO		LA PRENSA	
	US	USSR/ALLIES	US	USSR/ALLIES	US	USSR/ALLIES
Unfavorable	71[a]	7	64	6	15	65
Neutral	28	47	34	54	72	32
Favorable	1	47	1	40	13	4
(N)	(156)	(43)	(140)	(52)	(114)	(110)

[a]Percentages are rounded and do not always total 100.

TABLE 2

NEWS CATEGORIES BY NEWSPAPERS

	BARRICADA		DIARIO		LA PRENSA	
	US	USSR/ALLIES	US	USSR/ALLIES	US	USSR/ALLIES
Foreign Policy	58%	58%	55%	60%	47%	43%
Military Affairs	28%	9%	26%	10%	23%	19%
Others	15%	34%	18%	32%	32%	39%
(N)	(156)	(43)	(140)	(52)	(114)	(110)

TABLE 3

NEWS AGENCIES BY NEWSPAPERS

	BARRICADA	DIARIO	LA PRENSA
Western	30%	56%	100%
Third World/ Communist	55%	43%	
Other	14%	1%	
(N)	(126)	(135)	(150)

FOOTNOTES

1 Harold Lasswell, 'The Structure and Function of Communication in Society,' in Wilbur Schramm and Donald Roberts (eds.) The Process and Effects of Mass Communication (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 98-99.

2 Shirley Christian, Miami Herald, May 19, 1980, p.24.

3 Barry Rubin, How Others Report Us: America in the Foreign Press (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979) p. 57.

4 Guy Gugliotta, The San Antonio Light, March 4, 1982, p. 13.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 La Prensa of Nicaragua, Nov. 7, 1981, p. 6.

9 Thomas W. Benson, 'The Senses of Rhetoric: A Topical System for Critics, 'Central States Speech Journal,' 29:241 (1978).

10 Keith R. Stamm and M.-Daniel Jacoubovitch, 'How Much Do They Read in the Daily Newspaper: A Measurement Study.' Journalism Quarterly, 57:238 (1980).

11 Barricada of Nicaragua, Jan. 27, 1982, p. 5.

12 Lee B. Becker, Paul S. Underwood and Dafna Lemish, 'Western Wire Services and News of the USA in the Yugoslav Press,' Gazette, 28:113 (1981).

13 Ibid.

14 Barricada, op. cit.

15 Max L. Snijders, 'New Information Order is Incompatible with Democracy,' Gazette, 24:14 (1978).

16 Gugliotta, op. cit.

17 Allen Weinstein, 'Sandinist Pluralism,' New York Times, Apr. 16, 1982, p. 31.